

Fantasies of the ‘Soldier Hero’, Frustrations of the Jedburghs

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The irregular soldier, a maverick individual who operated outside of conventional military authority, has held a particular fascination for the British public since the late nineteenth century. As John Mackenzie has demonstrated, the colonial adventures of General Gordon were rich fodder for the press, while T.E. Lawrence’s exploits during the First World War further nourished that interest.¹ The Second World War witnessed the unleashing of unconventional ‘ungentlemanly’ warfare on a larger scale; against a merciless enemy in an all-out total war, there was no room for gentlemanliness. Stirred by his own experiences in the Second Boer War, Churchill embraced the notion of deploying small select groups of well-trained and highly motivated men to undertake ‘hit and run’ ‘pinprick’ attacks against much larger, more conventional ground troops. Consequently, Special Forces were utilised in British Army operations in every major theatre of war. This notion of ‘the Few’ against the many fitted with the British discourse of calm self-assurance, individualism and ‘being alone’ following the fall of France. Despite themes

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of communality, unity and 'all pulling together' being disseminated in myriad propaganda forms during the 'people's war' as Corinna Peniston-Bird has shown,² it was still the lone individual that featured as the ideal heroic role model: the solo pilot, tank crew member, submariner and, central to this discussion, commando.

In their examination of representations of the Commandos, an elite organisation formed in June 1940 after the withdrawal at Dunkirk, Mark Connelly and David Willcox assert that they fulfilled a 'dual function', conforming to stereotypical notions of the gentleman adventurer, audacious and adept at improvisation, while simultaneously personifying the spirit of the 'people's war', in that they were ordinary men trained to achieve the remarkable. Quoting a 1942 Pathé newsreel, they note that 'Commandos were the "Big Men" of the people'.³ Stories began featuring commandos from 1942 onwards; the popular boys' paper *Hotspur* included a serial entitled 'the Black Flash Commandos' who cooperated with Norwegian resisters and a novel by W.E. Johns, *King of the Commandos* (1943), was set in northern France.

The celebration of the irregular soldier continued after the Second World War in post-war adventure films and boys' comics, fuelled by heroic stories about secret agents, commandos, guerrillas and partisans in this less orthodox warfare. In his ground-breaking book on iconic imperial adventurers, Graham Dawson charts the impact that cultural narratives of the 'soldier hero' had on him and his generation growing up in the 1950s. He reveals the ways in which boys and men internalise this idealised form of manliness, 'fashioning in the imagination' masculinities that are 'lived out in the flesh'.⁴ In its imperial manifestations, masculinity is inextricably bound up with an 'external code of conduct' as John Tosh has examined.⁵ Yet a consideration of masculinity that is something more than simply 'a set of abstract codes' recognisable in the performances undertaken by men needs to acknowledge the role of the inner mind. Mike Roper's work on the unconscious is revealing here. In his analysis of subjectivity in memoirs about First World War experience, he notes that scholars of masculinity need to take account of emotional experience, as well as cultural constructions and social relations, without collapsing the distinctions.⁶ These conceptualisations of masculinity point to the hierarchy that exists; as R.W. Connell asserts, in any given culture some modes of manliness are celebrated and are positioned above others which are marginalised.⁷ The 'hegemonic' form of masculinity is never numerically dominant, however, which augments its elite status.

During the Second World War, some men who served in the British Army regarded their contribution as insufficiently active and, aspiring to undertake a more dynamic role which brought them into closer contact with the enemy, volunteered for 'special duties' that were considered especially hazardous. One such unit was the Jedburghs: three-man teams of mixed Allied nationality that parachuted in uniform into occupied France and the Netherlands as a post-D-Day operational reserve, tasked with stimulating and sustaining guerrilla warfare and coordinating resistance forces. The formation of Jedburgh teams was the idea of Peter Wilkinson, an officer in the British clandestine organisation the Special Operations Executive (henceforth SOE) who, observing civilian attempts to support Allied forces in repelling the German airborne assault of Crete in May 1941, concluded that civilians could be harnessed by Allied agents at the time of the invasion.⁸ Ninety-three three-man teams, given either men's forenames (Ivor and Guy for example) or the names of patented medicines (such as Quinine and Ammonia), comprising a leader, an officer and a non-commissioned radio operator, were parachuted in uniform into occupied France and seven teams into the Netherlands after the Allied invasion. The deployment of government-sanctioned uniformed military units undertaking irregular warfare behind enemy lines in tandem with local partisans in a coordinated strategy with conventional Allied invasion ground forces was unprecedented, as was the use of a coalition involving British, French and American Special Forces. The Jedburghs stemmed from a partnership between the SOE, its American counterpart the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Free French Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action (BCRA). Inter-allied cooperation was at the very heart of the Jedburgh concept: it was sited in France, where the Allies planned to launch their invasion; it was equipped by the Americans, who possessed the aircraft to infiltrate personnel into occupied Europe; and it was a British scheme, utilising British training methods, organisation and planning, and was informed by the unconventional warfare conducted twenty-five years earlier by T.E. Lawrence and, perhaps surprisingly, by Michael Collins, an Irish Republican Army (IRA) activist who organised attacks against representatives of the British state in Ireland.

The Jedburghs were the first truly international military force. Yet they are a little-known unit. The handful of books that have been produced about them have been popular in tone, focusing on mission facts.⁹ One exception is Benjamin F. Jones' *Eisenhower's Guerrillas*, a scholarly

account examining the broader political and military context.¹⁰ The confinement of Jedburgh narratives to popular works shows the continued importance of particular types of soldier heroisation to national memory. More significantly, the lack of sustained scholarly attention is suggestive of the continued discomfort felt about their lack of operational success: the shortfall between their gendered expectations and the realities of their deployment. Indeed, this chapter takes a very different approach by adopting a gendered perspective and by foregrounding the personnel. It is based on the personal testimonies I collected with eight British Jedburghs, twenty-seven interviews archived at the Imperial War Museum, published and unpublished memoirs and over a hundred files deposited at the National Archives. While few men were explicit in talking about masculinity, the nature of volunteering for hazardous duties for an organisation that only deployed men meant that the narratives they composed were, unsurprisingly, revealing of their masculine subjectivities. This chapter explores men's desires to volunteer for dangerous work and analyses their evaluations of their wartime contributions in order to show the gap between masculine fantasies of soldierly heroism and the actuality of lived military experience. It considers the consumption of popular literature in the inter-war period, heroic posturings, the recruitment and training processes which rewarded manifestations of hyper-masculinity and the blows to manhood that undermined the ability to construct fully heroic narratives. By exploring these issues, this chapter demonstrates the impact of gendered hero discourses in shaping and influencing the military experiences and choices of men in the Second World War. Their consumption of masculinity was effective and affective, but ultimately made them a promise that operational realities could not fulfil.

‘MAKE ME A SOLDIER, LORD ... MAKE ME A MAN’: GROWING UP IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

The men who served in the Jedburghs were part of a generation brought up in the wake of the First World War. This modern form of industrialised warfare is considered by some scholars to have had an emasculating effect: it wrought havoc on men's bodies, with bullets blasting and shrapnel shredding the long-held belief in physical perfection as a marker of ideal masculinity, and emotionally incapacitating men whose nerves

were unravelled by shellshock, mental breakdown and neuroses, the latter a complaint long associated with 'hysterical' women.¹¹ The potency of the soldier hero discourse was diluted by the experience of the war and the dominant understanding of the inter-war period is that of an outpouring of pacifist literature, such as Henry Williamson's *A Patriot's Progress* (1930), which emphasised the horror and futility of trench warfare. Consequently, Alison Light and Sonya Rose argue that a 'significant shift in masculine identity' occurred in the inter-war period, one that was not bound up with 'hard', aggressive heroism but rather was 'softer', pacifistic, sensitive to fear and anti-heroic.¹²

That a modified masculine discourse was in circulation has, however, been challenged, by Jessica Meyer, among others.¹³ While the notion of what it meant to be a man was under extreme pressure, the 'soldier hero' as a masculine ideal survived the First World War intact. Conceptualisation of the dead as the 'lost generation' and the 'finest flower of manhood' bolstered further the hegemonic status of the soldier.¹⁴ The orthodox view of the war as futile is founded on a small number of disillusioned poets whose impact on popular memory has been disproportionate: sales of Rupert Brooke's collection of heroic poems were 214 times higher by 1929 than that of Wilfred Owen's, for example.¹⁵ Jedburgh Glyn Loosmore, born in 1923, recalled the poems he was able to recite as a teenager: "'The Charge of the Light Brigade", "The Last Fight of the Revenge" and "How Horatius Kept the Bridge" ... "The Private of the Buffs", "The Red Thread of Honour"... Grenfell's "Into Battle" and Hodgson's "Before Action". Learn those poems and you will probably want to be a soldier yourself.'¹⁶ These poems provided Loosmore with a clear model of what a young man should aspire to be in order to become manly. 'This is what I was born for', he asserted.¹⁷ 'Before Action', a poem written on the eve of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, includes a plea to 'Make me a soldier, Lord ... Make me a man, O Lord ... Help me to die, O Lord.'¹⁸ Such poetry imbued Loosmore with a highly romanticised view of war and an undisputed notion of British superiority. His belief that it was glorious to die for King and Country was not compromised by the knowledge of what had befallen three-quarters of a million British men in the First World War; his heroic image of war was undiluted, if not encouraged and nurtured by the everyday masculine culture of the inter-war years.

Moreover, despite lamenting the 'doomed youth' who 'die like cattle', very few writers were avowedly anti-war.¹⁹ Conflict was still presented

as a heroic and ennobling opportunity in which comradeship was paramount. Perusal of a much greater variety of texts complicates the accepted view of futility. While R.C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (1928) has shaped later perceptions, over 400 plays and novels, many of which celebrated camaraderie and adventure, were published in the inter-war period, imbuing another generation with a highly romantic notion of war. Loosmore reflected: 'Without being in any way militaristic, I think boys read stories about the war which conditioned them to think that serving in the forces was the common lot of young men ... Lots of boys soaked themselves in this.'²⁰

Furthermore, cheap and readily circulated papers, such as *Modern Boy*, *Adventure* and *Rover*, were likely to be the chosen reading material of teenage boys of all classes in the inter-war period (in a time before comics had been devised and when childhood literacy levels were high). In her analysis of nearly a century of such publications, Kelly Boyd concludes that while stories about schoolboys replaced tales about soldiers and battles that had populated the papers in the pre-1914 period, there was 'more fighting, bleeding and brutality [featured] in the pages of inter-war story papers than ever before'.²¹ As George Orwell noted in an essay about boys' weekly story papers, such 'blood-and-thunder stuff' exalted the 'picturesque side of the Great War', including stories that featured characters who were members of the air force and secret service, rather than the infantry, and, imbued with a tone of class snobishness, 'gutter patriotism', xenophobia and conservatism, they promoted a set of values that were 'hopelessly out of date'.²² War was depicted as offering adventure that was attainable; schoolboys could become heroes too, guaranteeing reader identification with the masculine characters depicted. Loosmore recollected that he was motivated 'to get into action ... [by] excitement, *Boys Own Paper*'.²³ These stories, which were a central part of boys' 'fantasy life' fuelling their imaginations, were 'windows into the ideologies of masculinity' that were circulating at this time.²⁴

Illustrated histories were another aspect of the masculine pleasure-culture of war and were a key site for inculcating idealised notions of martial masculinity, facilitating boys' negotiation into manhood. Loosmore believed that his peer group was influenced in particular by Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*. Urging me to read it, he recalled that 'it helped to shape a generation. It contains an extraordinary number of poems that extol heroism and self-sacrifice. It gave

boys of my generation the notion that it was praiseworthy to serve, and, if necessary, die for one's country.'²⁵ Mee's encyclopedia, which had been published in fortnightly editions between 1908 and 1910 and reprinted throughout the inter-war period, was a product of a bygone era which celebrated a chauvinist view of British imperialism and 'muscular Christianity'. 'Quit you like a man: be strong' one issue exhorted.²⁶ While the encyclopedia incorporated values and attitudes that were historically and culturally specific to the Edwardian period, its continued reprinting between the wars meant that it was consumed by a later generation who absorbed attitudes of 'self-sacrifice ... you soaked this in ... This was the ethos, the climate of the times.'²⁷ Loosmore's recollections about this publication demonstrate its impact and influence on a generation of eager young men, keen to flex their patriotic muscles.

While it is impossible to be exact about the impact of models of desirable masculine behaviour that were disseminated in popular literature and consumed by youth in this period, given they could be read at a purely superficial level, and while they did not necessarily determine behaviour, it can be asserted that they shaped views and values. Decades after the war had ended, Loosmore still held to their importance. As Orwell noted, many men are 'carrying through life an imaginative background which they acquired in childhood'.²⁸ The external role models depicted in these war stories and poems fuelled teenage boys' inner or psychic desires, and, as Dawson asserts, provided 'shared forms of fantasy and play through which their own masculinity could be imaginatively secured'.²⁹

Many young men raised on this literature were eager to serve when conflict erupted again, seemingly undeterred by the prospect of sustaining horrific injuries and impervious to thoughts of their own mortality. 'None of us were under any illusions what would happen if we did get caught', asserted Jedburgh Ron Brierley.³⁰ Operating behind German lines dressed in the battledress uniform of their country with the insignia of their previous regiment and a Special Forces badge, most Jedburghs thought it unlikely that the German Army would adhere to the Geneva Convention. Indeed, Hitler's Commando Order of October 1942 stated bluntly that irregulars would be shot without trial. Jedburgh Bernard Knox recalled that upon receipt of their gear and supplies, they did not have to provide a signature:

That was a sign that we were regarded as lost – together with our equipment – the moment we got on the plane. But none of us had the slightest doubt that what we were doing was absolutely right and, of course, that carried us through. Nobody, not one man, bugged out. They were baying to get into the field.³¹

Post-war accounts often emphasise how dangerous their missions should have been and this serves to bolster their masculine credentials which were threatened by the ultimate failure of most of the Jed teams. While Brierley and Knox were fatalistic about their chances of survival, others emphasised their invincibility. Fred Bailey, for example, asserted: ‘We knew there was a likelihood [of dying but] you never thought it would happen to you. Always going to be the other chap.’³² Bill Colby, an American Jedburgh who went on to serve as Director General of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), ascribed the enthusiasm to serve as youthful arrogance:

None of us dwelt on the dangers of what we were preparing to do ... The usual young man’s conceit that he is invulnerable and immortal enveloped us all. Everything was dealt with as a joke; in a sense we were far too much caught up in the adventure that we were undertaking to be afraid.³³

War allowed men ‘soaked’ in heroic literature to live the manly virtues they had imbibed through popular juvenile culture. Far from being dissuaded by the brutalities of the First World War, their consumption of military masculinity raised a high bar for their attainment of patriotic manliness.

‘KEEN TO BE IN THE THICK OF THE ACTION’: UNDERAGE VOLUNTEERING FOR WAR SERVICE

None of the men with whom I was in contact had any recollections of the earlier war, the oldest having been born in 1914, but despite this, they held it in fascination.³⁴ All had heard stories of the conflict told by their relatives. Of the five million British men who served during the First World War, six in every seven men returned. The war was undoubtedly the seminal experience of their lives and in talking to their sons and nephews, however vaguely, they passed on to the next generation the impression that to serve was noteworthy. There is little hard evidence to

substantiate the widely held view that veterans were disinclined to speak about their war experiences. They were probably reluctant to narrate the more traumatic aspects of their own experience, or to speak of the monotonous bits, and were instead much more likely to focus on foregrounding the positive and the heroic. Tommy MacPherson recalled 'We had been brought up at the knees of our elders on the tales of the First World War.'³⁵ Dick Rubinstein had often overheard his father talking to his friends about volunteering, and as tension escalated in Europe in the mid-1930s, fuelled by the Anschluss, sixteen-year-old Rubinstein thought, 'well come on chum, it's about time perhaps you did something yourself'.³⁶ Like the men of his father's generation, martial service comprised an important test of masculinity and a way in which men could show what they were made of. Rubinstein constructed a lengthy narrative of volunteering and manoeuvring himself into the action. In his half-term holidays from public school in March 1938, he went to Chelsea Barracks to join the Territorial Army:

I had to put my age up a year [Laughter]. The adjutant of the unit I went to see said 'how old are you son?' I said '16' and he said '... you're a big chap so why don't you go outside and we'll start this conversation again' [Laughter] and they let me in.³⁷

Recruiting officers colluded with enthusiastic underage teenage boys, much as they had in the First World War.³⁸ Rubinstein was mobilised for the Munich Crisis in September 1938 and delighted in informing his headmaster that he would not be coming to school as he had been called up to an anti-aircraft unit. Following a fortnight's service, and conflict being averted, he returned to school and to his form master's withering put down: 'You may think you're a bloody hero but to me you're just a schoolboy.'

Rubinstein, like many men of his generation, remained impervious to anti-war disillusionment and was part of the flood of volunteers who joined the Territorial Army as war looked increasingly likely. He was later mobilised and was based in London tracking enemy planes in a Searchlights unit. By 1943 he was eager to 'get out' of anti-aircraft as he 'realised that it wasn't going to be very long before somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said you should be doing something a bit more active'. The pressure to play a more dynamic role than that assigned by the forces was often self-imposed, rather than an external one. Working

alongside Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) women had the potential to undermine young physically fit men, who were 'rankled' by their presence and emasculated by their own implied passivity.³⁹ This may have prompted Rubinstein to seek a more vigorously combatant wartime role in which women were prevented from participating. He approached the RAF, the Artillery, the Commandos and the Royal Army Service Corps seeking to transfer, all of which would have offered the opportunity to go overseas, but was unsuccessful each time. With a growing sense of frustration that he was not seeing action, he decided to apply for 'the very next thing that comes in' which was a request for volunteers for special operations work in occupied Europe:

My hand was going like this [shakes frantically] and I thought surely if you're going to live with yourself mate, you'd better go on with it ... And generally we were fed up with what we had been doing in the Army. We wanted to do something ... I wanted to have some control over what I was doing, and anyway it sounded exciting and one thought one would have parachute wings and even a green beret perhaps. And of course vanity plays a part in this. The bravest thing I did was to respond to this bloody letter. It would have been a braver thing to have stepped out of it ... [but I] didn't have the guts to do this, you were going to go on and do it even if you shat your trousers [Laughter].⁴⁰

Rubinstein recognised the seriousness of volunteering for special duties, enlisted so that he might 'live with himself' and overcame his anxiety. While fear preoccupied him, withdrawing from the Jedburchs and returning to his unit would have been more deeply emasculating.

A recurring motif in post-war narratives is that of 'taking control'. Ron Brierley wanted some influence over his posting. Too young to be called up for active service, he volunteered during the Battle of Britain to join a Young Soldiers' Battalion. When he came of conscription age and available for posting overseas, he applied to join the Royal Tank Regiment, 'a far better way to see the war through than stamping around on your feet'.⁴¹ In 1943 he saw a notice on his unit board asking for people with basic knowledge of radio and a willingness to undergo parachute training to volunteer. He had 'still not heard a shot fired in anger' and was 'keen to be in the thick of the action' so put his name forward. Gary Sheffield has noted that soldiers manoeuvred themselves into comparatively 'safe' units of the forces.⁴² By contrast, the men who

volunteered for hazardous work navigated their way into dangerous roles in a bid to access an experience they had read, heard about and internalised as part of their masculine identity. In doing so, they strove to meet their own perceptions of what constituted acceptable wartime service. Their choice of unit was thus predicated on the unsafe, the less protected. This was despite the fact that they were cognisant of the extreme danger of their role. In fact, proximity to danger and action was a prerequisite to prevent 'missing out'.

The notion of 'doing one's bit' was another common trope in retrospective testimonies of underage volunteering. Sixteen-year-old Harry Verlander was keen to be 'doing something' and recalled 'the frustration of not actually doing anything positive about this war'.⁴³ Recognising that 'the boys in uniform' were 'getting all the girls', he acquired a khaki uniform in 1941 by joining the Home Guard, an organisation established by Anthony Eden in response to public pressure at the height of the invasion threat in May 1940.⁴⁴ The following year he applied to join the King's Royal Rifle Corps, backdating his birth date by two years, and then regularly responded to requests for volunteers to join parachute regiments and commandos because 'angry young men such as me were getting worried. We felt we were not doing enough; we wanted to get back at the Germans before it was too late and dole out some of our own medicine ... Vengeance was on our minds.'⁴⁵

Rubenstein, Brierley and Verlander each volunteered for service prior to reaching the age of conscription and then, 'feeling unappreciated' and 'fed up' with being deployed in Britain and imagining themselves playing a more active role in the war in which they might 'get to grips with the enemy',⁴⁶ they made repeated attempts to escape what they perceived to be a dull posting. '[W]hen you're an 18-year-old lad you can't wait to get in there', asserted Fred Bailey.⁴⁷ Youthfulness was, then, a key element in narratives of volunteering. Their heroic posturings took different forms but shared much in common; as we saw above, Rubenstein imagined himself in the green beret of Special Forces and proudly sporting the parachute wings badge on his shoulder, visual signifiers attesting to his membership of an elite unit. Fred Bailey, who volunteered for the Royal Armoured Corps on his eighteenth birthday, saw himself as a 'soldier hero' of the North Africa campaign: 'The battle was raging in the desert and I sort of visualised myself out there in a tank.'⁴⁸ Glyn Loosmore wanted to 'follow in the steps of Lawrence of Arabia' and, similarly, Bill Colby, who 'fantasized myself' as something akin

to Lawrence, recollected buying a copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and 'pos[ing] as heroes' with his friends.⁴⁹ Eighteen-year-old Arthur Brown was also spurred on by the glamour and pluck of volunteering for special duties, and recalled thinking, upon recruitment to the unit that, 'We were heroes already'. His wish fulfilment of joining the Special Forces led to the imagining of his superiority over others; he considered himself a 'brassneck', brimming with 'brazenness, self-confidence'.⁵⁰ Young men were especially susceptible to heroic notions regarding special duties and what constituted acceptable military service and used the framework of the 'soldier hero' in their retrospective accounts of volunteering for special duties. Their proximity to a youth culture which valorised sacrifice, nobility and heroic impulsiveness made them fully primed volunteers for roles of danger, pluck and derring-do. Their collective play-acting of manly heroism was to contrast significantly with their experience.

'A MAN FOND OF RISK AND ADVENTURE': RECRUITING FOR SPECIAL DUTIES

Recruitment of personnel for the Jedburghs took place in the latter half of 1943. They needed men who could adapt to the conditions of irregular warfare while also able to organise surprise attacks and military operations.⁵¹ They wanted 'the unconventional, unsubmitive types, the spirited individualist ... the troublemakers'.⁵² A Student Assessment Board (SAB) gauged to what extent (ranked +, 0, or -) volunteers possessed the thirty-two 'special qualities' that were listed on a form as comprising the ideal recruit: he was to be 'a man of the world' who was 'fond of risk and adventure', 'an aggressive active type' who 'will have enthusiasm for the work' and 'will retain a steady morale', 'a good fighting soldier' with 'good physical stamina' who can 'command others', has 'self-confidence' and 'the will to win and the belief that they will win', a 'man of integrity' who was 'considerate of others', 'a practical sort of man' who 'has plenty of personal initiative' and will 'take decisions decisively'.⁵³ The language used on the form cataloguing the desirable physical and mental qualities that recruits ought to exhibit mirrors the key stereotypical signifiers of idealised martial masculinity: experience, adventure, aggression, action, drive, physicality, leadership, self-assurance, resolve, honour, pragmatism and resourcefulness. This rigid set of desired characteristics flattens masculinity to a one-dimensional, singular

and hegemonic form. Not only does the SAB form make clear what kind of man was required, but it also made evident the exclusion of women.

While SOE and OSS recruited female agents to serve as wireless operators and couriers in France and the Netherlands, the Jedburghs were exclusively male. 'This was sheer bloody fighting, there would have been no role for females here', asserted Dick Rubinstein. 'It wasn't a female environment at all. I don't want to over-dramatise it but it was rough.'⁵⁴ The need to withstand punishing circumstances was recognised by headquarters who required the men who passed the SAB to have 'AI physical fitness and [an] ability to endure possibly extremely hard conditions'.⁵⁵ Those that began the Jedburgh training, which commenced on 1 January 1944, were the elite and they were prepared for conditions that they might face behind enemy lines. It was very different to the basic British Army training they had already undertaken; it resembled the physically demanding modern techniques of Commando instruction. The first six weeks included demolitions and weapons training, guerrilla tactics, street fighting and physical training. American Jedburgh Robert Kehoe recalled the 'semireligious dedication to the pushup as being the true mark of manhood'.⁵⁶ This competitive ritual, in which recruits measured their manliness against that of their comrades, was an important aspect of male bonding. They were trained in 'ungentlemanly' techniques such as silent killing and unarmed combat. After this initial phase of basic training, they received six weeks of operational training where they were taught how to live off the land and given practical displays of killing animals. On a survival training exercise, they were handed a live sheep and a bag of flour and told 'that's your supper'.⁵⁷ The substitution of home, along with all its 'softening' comforts, with the austerity of the great outdoors fashioned a 'hard masculinity' which toughened them up and inculcated manly qualities of grit and determination. The brutal, visceral, sweaty, bloody ungentlemanliness that was cultivated during the training contrasted with the high ideals of noble and sacrificial manliness that they had consumed in their youth.

Parachute training functioned as a vital part of the preparation as this was the method by which the men were infiltrated into occupied France. Those who had parachuted previously often embellished their tales according to Kehoe and 'the listener's ability to absorb tales of gore [was] regarded as a sign of toughness'.⁵⁸ The exclusively male unit and the physically demanding nature of the training created a distinct 'soldierly' identity forged in the absence of women and confirmed the

Jedburghs' elite status. As veterans of the service attested: 'we were a bit of an elite', 'something unique, something a bit special', 'it was something to have been a Jed'.⁵⁹ This hardened masculinity withstood the bizarre ritual of selecting the multinational teams: a British or American officer teamed up with a French officer and a 'courtship' took place in which the couple were considered 'engaged'. If the men worked well together their 'marriage' was officially announced on the noticeboard. If not, they 'divorced' and selected another mate. A wireless operator of any nationality was then chosen by the couple as their 'child'.⁶⁰ The 'family' were then ready for special ops. Family virtues and patriarchal structuring remained at the heart of masculine subjectivities and were cleverly, if amusingly, mobilised here to further cement bonds forged through the hardship of training.

ON ACTIVE SERVICE: SPECIAL DUTIES BEHIND ENEMY LINES

The first team to be infiltrated was Team Hugh which parachuted into the Châteauroux area in central France on 5/6 June 1944. Team Hilary reported that 'we were received everywhere as heroes' and Team George recalled being greeted as liberators: 'Girls showered the men with kisses and poured them wine and handed them bouquets of flowers'.⁶¹ This was because, as William Crawshay noted, 'We were the boys carrying the goodies', or as Fred Bailey asserted 'the goose that laid the golden egg'.⁶² Consequently, they 'lived like fighting cocks'.⁶³ They basked in the public affirmation of their heroic status. For some, their fantasies were becoming reality. Team Hamish sent a message to London saying, '[we] need mines and booby traps ... Been playing games with Boche patrols. It's fun'.⁶⁴ Arthur Brown recollected: 'I regarded myself as a boy mucking about in war'.⁶⁵ At the liberation of French towns and villages, Jedburghs were frequently feted as heroic emancipators. Harry Verlander recalled being introduced as 'the first English parachutist' to the crowds at Niort on 6 September 1944. 'Over eager females' tried to 'grab hold' of him, 'ladies of all ages' 'smothered' him in 'well meaning kisses' and young women handed him their 'visiting cards' printed with their addresses.⁶⁶ Team Gerald participated in the liberation of eight towns and were often met by the mayor, given champagne and flowers and were 'kissed by hundreds of French girls'.⁶⁷ Another way in which accounts conformed to the heroic was through the recognition that the physically challenging circumstances in which these men had found

themselves encouraged homosocial comradeship. Team Gerald, for example, recorded: 'In our team we had constantly a spirit of cooperation between the three members and I feel sure that the three of us will be life long friends having faced the same dangers.'⁶⁸ In these ways the debriefing reports and post-war accounts shore up the heroic image of the irregular soldier. Looking back on his wartime experience with the Jedburghs, Bill Colby noted that this was:

more than an episode or an adventure. It had a major impact on me personally of course, transforming the young and somewhat shy student I was before into a man with confidence, knowing that I could face risk and danger and hold my own in a company of free spirits exulting in their bravery.⁶⁹

While there is plenty of evidence of action, female adoration and camaraderie in the testimonies, which conform to the classic heroic narrative and assist what oral historians call 'psychic composure', what is particularly striking are the elements that have the potential to unsettle the veteran, to lead to disequilibrium or 'discomposure': the repeated references to the delays, and consequently arriving in France too late to contribute, and to the lack of weaponry to effect action.⁷⁰ The promises of both noble manliness, which had been nurtured in their youth, and gritty heroic masculinity, promoted during the specialist training, were left largely unfulfilled by a war careering towards its conclusion while crack troops sat on the sidelines stewing in frustration.

Only one team was infiltrated on the night of 5/6 June 1944, while the other ninety-two were deployed over the course of the next three months. The rapidity with which the Allies advanced meant that many teams were held back. Indeed, some teams were still in Britain on 25 August when Paris was liberated. The men who had volunteered for special duties were greatly frustrated by the delay to the start of their missions. While on standby awaiting deployment, the men whiled away the time playing ball games, attending dances, and visiting the cinema and local pubs. Leo Marks, the head of SOE's coding section, was due to give a lecture but was advised by the commanding officer not to come as the previous two speakers had received 'a very rough reception': the Jedburghs, who 'had been promised a key role on D-Day and were angry at their exclusion' were 'in a state of near mutiny'. He ignored the advice and adopted a belligerent tone, using profane language to explain

the thousands of attempts made by his coding staff to crack indecipherable messages: 'listen, you bastards ... we happen to be cunts enough to believe that you're worth it.' He ended by quoting the last line of John Milton's poem 'On His Blindness': 'they also serve who only stand and wait.'⁷¹

These were men who were 'ready and raring to go', eager to fulfil their masculine fantasies of active military participation.⁷² Consequently, many Jedburghs believed they had been infiltrated too late to be of full use. The relative rapidity with which the Allied forces pushed through France meant that some found the area they had parachuted into had already been liberated while others were soon overrun: several teams' missions lasted less than a week. Fifty-two teams, over half the total, commented on this in their debriefing reports. Team Scion, who were infiltrated on 30 August, noted 'we were "workers of the eleventh hour"', 'unable to perform a real Jedburgh task' and considered they had been dropped five months too late.⁷³ Similarly, Team Douglas were 'regarded as "after the battle troops"'.⁷⁴ Team Maurice also wrote of their dissatisfaction and sense of abandonment, making evident their feeling of emasculation: '[b]y the time we arrived in France, our state of mind was somewhat that of a woman whose lover has left without saying goodbye.'⁷⁵ This was also a recurring motif in the interviews: Fred Bailey, for example, returned to this issue six times, Dick Rubenstein, who recalled that many of the men were on a training scheme in Britain when news of D-Day circulated, recalled 'we were all a bit disgusted' and Arthur Brown remembered 'we all said "oh God we've missed it!" This was a great source of anger among the Jeds ... Didn't like it one bit.'⁷⁶ The rage aimed at the military machine for failing to effectively use them was one way in which they might recoup their lost masculine status: they constructed lengthy narratives of being highly trained elite Special Forces personnel who were prepared to fight and even die but were let down by the decision to delay their entry. The postponement led a number of teams to believe their missions had failed. The despondency felt by the author of Team Andrew's report is palpable: 'I was perhaps of some use as a clothes peg for British uniform ... Mission Andrew was a failure.'⁷⁷ Dick Rubenstein, who parachuted on 8 August 1944, returning eighteen days later, noted 'there wasn't really more for us to do ... [M]y work in France was not of great military significance.'⁷⁸ He concluded his account of his operations in France: 'that was Rubinstein's role in France

and he wasn't very pleased with it. I was just disappointed that's all, but you know it's the luck of the draw.'⁷⁹ Looking through his photograph album after the interview, he said of one image of him in his military uniform 'not very manly'. The reality of undertaking special duties, which had failed to live up to their boyish fantasies that had motivated them to volunteer, had the potential to lead to discomposure. This could call into question the coherent masculine identity that the interviewee had carefully constructed up to that point in the oral history interview. This was especially apparent with Oliver Brown. When I asked him what being decorated after the war meant to him, he responded:

I would have preferred to [hesitation] had [hesitation] something else other than the OBE [Order of the British Empire], although the one I would have preferred to have got is a minor decoration. I'd have rather had an MC [Military Cross] than an OBE. An MC is more a fighting man's medal. The OBE is an organiser's medal. I mean um, they're known in the services, the OBE, for 'other bugger's efforts' [laughter] or 'on bottom earned'! [laughter] I would rather pass that [MC] on to my family than an organising [medal]. I mean I'd rather felt that the family would recognise me as a fighting soldier than an organising soldier.⁸⁰

For others, it was their specific role that prevented them from fulfilling their fantasies of heroic action. Wireless operators were essential for maintaining contact with Allied headquarters and were often prohibited by their leaders from engaging in combat operations. Jack Grinham was envious of his team members who had greater opportunities to ambush the enemy: 'I had to stay at the farm with my radio so I missed all the fun, and to my disgust never fired a shot in anger.'⁸¹

The failure of headquarters to deliver supplies as promised was another source of frustration. Seventeen team reports noted that requests went unanswered. Team Ivor stated: 'In six weeks, to arm approximately 5000 men we received but 5 aircraft, one of which dropped precisely one package... They might as well have sent us knitting needles.'⁸² Their inability to secure supplies for the resistance undermined their authority and served to emasculate them. The disparaging reference to knitting needles undoubtedly refers to the connotations of this implement of productive feminine leisure that was a central plank of the female war effort in the two world wars. The strength of feeling was also evident in Team George's report:

When we received the message giving us the order to attack, as we were about to be over run without having received the armament for the 4,000 men we had at that time organized and for the 5,000 who would very soon be ready, we cried like kids considering our useless set, our useless work and all the dangers that patriots of Loire Inferieure had gone through to get to that point, and remembering how many guys in prison or under the earth had paid for the trouble they had looking for useless grounds and organizing useless reception committees – for planes which never came ... We were feeling very depressed, considering what could have been done if we had received the arms and money we were begging for in time.⁸³

The Jedburghs' sense of impotence, expressed so vividly in personal accounts ('depressed', 'disgust', 'disappointed', 'not very glorious', 'a failure', 'not very pleased', 'useless'), is evidence that the fantasies of action that had motivated them to enlist played out very differently in reality. Knitting, crying and begging were hardly the manly actions and virtues that they had imbibed in their youth.

CONCLUSION

Gendered expectations of warfare were not insignificant to the men who volunteered to join the Jedburghs. Having internalised the flattened and heroic masculinity of their inter-war childhoods, perceptions of their own manliness shaped outlooks and actions. The Special Forces presented an opportunity to assert masculinity as something brave, daring and individualistic. They ultimately held themselves to a standard of masculinity that their actual experience of war could not deliver. While occupied France provided a space in which heroic masculinity could be played out, for many the reality did not live up to the fantasy: long delays in infiltration resulted in a belief that they had not been fully utilised, failure to drop the required supplies rendered them impotent, the cosseted role of wireless operator prevented some from seeing any action and the presentation of 'organising' rather than 'fighting' medals was a further blow to masculinity. Many men who were denied active overseas service (whether it was because of being in a reserved occupation, conscripted to work in the mines as a 'Bevin Boy' or because of undertaking a 'safer' military role on the home front) experienced a strong sense of emasculation. This feeling of impotence was heightened for the men who had been trained to see themselves as the elite, elevated above others in

the military, and who expected to have the opportunity to act heroically. This caused a great internal conflict. The primacy of active service was so important to some men that to have it removed caused clear ruptures in their masculine sense of self. Their disappointment and disgust decades later demonstrate the potency of these ideals and the impotency of frustrated manliness. It was no coincidence that so many of the ninety British Jedburghs turned to the Empire to reconstitute their masculinities, volunteering to join Force 136 for further action. Operating as three-man British Jed teams, they tested their manhood in an altogether different kind of guerrilla warfare in the Burmese jungle. The colonial arena provided a landscape for the fulfilment of their imperial soldier hero desires.

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